

Reading the Intentionality of Young Children

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Abstract

Through six video clips and accompanying commentary, the author argues that by carefully observing how very young children play, adults can gain insight into their high-level thinking and their knowledge, as well as the implications that their strategies hold for their assumptions, theories, and expectations. Adults can then become more protective of children's time during play, more skillful in making a parallel entry into their world, and more effective in helping them extend or reconsider their assumptions about how the social and physical world works. Suggestions for video documentation in classrooms are included.

Introduction

Just because infants or 1-year-old children cannot tell us what they are trying to do does not mean that they are without plans or any expectations. Young children have many intentions that we can read by careful attention to their subtle movements and glances. A grasp is not the same as a point. A swipe has a different purpose than a push. A sideways glance to Mom or Dad frames the next action differently than the same action without the parent-ward glance. While our speculations might garner consensus from others who slow down to watch the same example of a child's activity (say, in a video clip), we seldom take the time. Once we do slow down, we develop a heightened appreciation and respect for the strategies and assumptions that very young children already have, and we thereby become more effective in the moves we make to support their explorations.

A Poke Is Not a Pat

In this clip, two children, about 14 months of age, pat, rub, poke, and scrape a large block of clay. As you watch their actions, consider their goals and what each goal implies about their knowledge. [Click here](#). A poke implies that they expect the clay to indent. A scrape implies that they expect some of the clay to separate from the large block. A rub implies that they expect the clay is smooth or that they want to confirm this expectation. And a downward pat implies that they expect the clay to flatten. Each action carries with it a readable implication about what the child knows.

We may call these actions "sensory play," but that phrase does not contain any reference to the relation between the act and the nature of the child's thinking. Be aware that these acts imply that the child is thinking as much about, "How does this medium behave?" as about, "Is this medium X (e.g., cold)?" Indeed, even the "sensation" smooth must be confirmed by rubbing the clay to feel how it *behaves* during that brief time period of moving the hand across its surface. For the child, smooth is an event, not a discrete sensory input. The rub implies that the child is testing how the medium behaves ("no change in pressure on my hand" versus "irregular pressure on my hand"). Thus we reveal a greater understanding of "sensory play" when we call it "event perception" (see Mandler, 2006).

Sticking Is More Than Stacking

Putting objects together can look different based on the child's intention. Look at this child putting two blocks together. [Click here](#). It is clear from her persistence, the elevation of her shoulder, and the

firm pushing in that she expects the blocks to join. That is, once she releases her pressure on the blocks, she expects them to stay together. She is telling us through action what she knows about these particular blocks—or at least what she expects.

In the next clip, another child brings one block to the face of another block and does not press them together firmly. [Click here](#). Indeed, he is so sure that they are not joined that, with the most gentle of lifts, he separates the top block in order to replace it with another. Had he thought that the blocks were joined, he would have held the bottom block in order to prevent its movement as he tugged on the top block. He also does not work with the blocks in midair as the previous child did with the Lego blocks that stick together.

Sometimes we read the child's intention by considering what the child does not do. If you look at this clip again, you will also notice that the boy is using a rule: place the wider blocks lower in the stack than the more narrow blocks. He knows more than the fact that these blocks can be easily reassembled; he also has a sense of the aesthetics of a tower that tapers as it ascends. It's possible that he may know that stacking wide things on narrow things can lead to collapse, but in looking at his rearrangements, particularly in the horizontal plane where there is little relevance to falling, it appears that he is going after a particular look.

The Twist Tells the Tale

Watch the small movements as these 1-year-old children place keys into the keyhole of a doorknob in the next clip. "Insert and twist" implies different assumptions than "insert and remove." When the girl in pink inserts and twists a key, we cannot assume that she understands the function of the twist, but she knows that "twisting" is the core action for keys. She is not simply putting a round peg into a round hole. [Click here](#). We need not speculate that she is trying to unlock the doorknob, but she has shown us that she is aware that a keyhole is not just another hole to fill up. We also should be impressed that the child on the left tries a new key when the current key does not fit. (We saw a similar strategy from the girl trying to attach one Lego block to another.) We can reason that the child believes one of the keys in the box will match the keyhole. Yet the child does not seem to think about the orientation of the key, given that it might be placed at a bad angle. Again, we can read the knowledge and intention of the child by considering what the child does not do.

Giving or Unloading

How can we know that a very young child's action is social in nature rather than physical? If a child places a cup in your lap, is the child trying to get rid of the physical object or is the child trying to engage you socially by gifting the object? In this case, the pauses, the sequence, and the shared gaze are clues. Compare these sequences:

- Child holds cup by her side, places cup in your lap while looking at cup, walks away.
- Child holds cup by her side, places cup in your lap, looks into your eyes, walks away.
- Child holds cup by her side, looks toward your face, holds her gaze until you return her gaze and smile, places cup in your lap.
- Child holds cup by her side, lifts cup in front of you while looking toward your face, holds gaze until you return her gaze and smile, places cup in your lap.

You probably understand as you read through these four examples that they imply increasing levels of sociability. The last example includes some tentativeness on the part of the child about your desire for the cup; she needs to have some indication of your willingness to receive the cup. The next-to-last example could mean that the child wants you to acknowledge her presence—but not necessarily her present.

Watch these two video clips and think about the thinking of each child. In the first clip, the child places a cup in the lap of an adult who is holding an infant. [Click here](#). In the second clip, an adult

holds a fretting child, and the child offers him a pacifier to soothe his distress. [Click here](#). By considering the timing of the actions, what assumptions can you make about the intent of the giving child, and what might she fail to consider as she tries to accomplish her intended goal?

Better Reading, Better Support

While these examples may be familiar to you and not extremely difficult to interpret, the fact remains that we too often generalize what we see when children play. We categorize children's play using words such as "imitative," "imaginative," or "creative." Even when we observe the nuances of children's actions, we may not consider their high-level thinking, their knowledge, and the implications that their strategies hold for their assumptions, theories, and expectations. Once we become sensitive to children's high-level thinking, we find that we become more protective of their time during play, more skillful in making a parallel entry into their world, and more effective in helping them extend or reconsider their assumptions about how the social and physical world works.

In using video documentation, we are not doing scientific research. It does not matter to us, as teachers, if our theory of the child's theory is correct in any particular instance. We are looking for a good guess that can help us ask a better question or inform a conversation with a verbal child or a provocation that causes children to rethink a strategy. If our theory of the child's theory is wrong, we will eventually know as we continue to play with or observe the children. We stay vigilant to the nuances of child behavior as we revise our theory of what the children are thinking. But we do not reduce the child's intelligence to manifest skills or achievements. We use the video to speculate about the children's thinking, their goals, strategies, and theories that explain the choices that children make (see Forman & Hall, 2005).

Video Documentation in Classrooms

We often do not know the full significance of a video segment until we have watched that segment three or four times. The understanding comes gradually as we speculate on why a child did something and then review the video several times to cross-check that speculation in consultation with another adult. Thus defines the advantage of video—one can rewind reality.

By clicking on this "[Comments Box](#)," readers may comment on this article. Selected substantive contributions will be posted on this Web site for further discussion.



In the schools that send digital video files to Videatives, Inc., such as the ones seen in this article, particularly the Boulder Journey School, the teachers wear small digital video cameras around their necks, ready to press the record button whenever they see children engaged in something purposive. A teacher may also record another teacher as she asks children to reflect on the meaning of some set of facts or the reasons for something the children did or said. And for infants and toddlers, the video camera lingers on the small movements of the hands and eyes that help the adult read the intentions of preverbal children.

A teacher who wants to use video documentation should wait for some protracted situation where a story "unfolds," a story that lays out the starts and stops as a child tries to reach a goal. The goal could be "how can I prevent my friend Lisa from leaving my play space" to "how can I let an observer know that I am pretending to be a penguin." These stories might be no more than 2 minutes, but the "juicy" clips will inform you about the ways children use their assumptions about how the social and physical world works and how to maximize their success by modifying their strategies.

To begin theorizing about what a child thinks, a teacher might pay particular attention to any moves that one might generally call "change of mind" such as starting to put a pointed block on the top of a stack but aborting that move in mid-flight, or erasing a pencil mark to make a different one, or

changing a loud voice to a soft voice uttering the same message. These small changes are filled with implications about how a child thinks.

Laughter is also a clue to high-level thinking. When a child laughs, very often it is because something has happened that the child did not expect. If an event makes a child laugh because that event violates the child's expectation, then we work to understand what that expectation was. An expectation is just another word for a theory.

It's likely that we can never read too much into a clip, particularly if we closely map the child's behavior to our claims. The beauty of video is that we can debate our interpretations. In a sense, video is the "democratization of documentation."

Acknowledgments

These two clips with supporting text can be downloaded at <http://www.videatives.com/content-new/store/index.php?cPath=1> under the titles "Was She Giving or Unloading?" and "It Takes to Give." We thank the Boulder Journey School for providing Videatives with the clips you see in this article.

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